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What is the potential wealth of a region?

Is it the sum total of all its finite resources measured solely in dollars and cents?

Can wealth be used and developed, and still be conserved?

Need development of resources always be synonymous with plunder?

Can protection of the environment be compatible with economic objectives?

And, finally, what should be the role of government in the development of a region's resources?

These are some of the questions I would like to pose here this evening.

I do not have all the answers, and I suspect you don't either. But the fact that we dare to ask ourselves these questions today proves we have come a long way in our thinking in just a few years.

The day was -- not too long ago -- when the word "planning" was a scareword -- a term so controversial that it was used only behind closed doors, never in "polite society".

Today, land-use planning -- for example -- is an accepted concept, an essential element of a national program of conservation and development of our natural resources and protection of our environment.

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Remarks by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research & Education, The Sigurd Olson Institute of Environmental Studies, Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin, Friday, May 13, 1977.

Here I want to emphasize a particular point. Too much of our planning has been done in a vacuum. We must increase our efforts to work together in the planning arena. Our objective should be integration of planning at all levels. Counties and states must play leading roles in planning regardless of the land ownership pattern. Don't immediately turn off and say "big brother government." We are talking about the public directing the total process, for the benefit of the private land holder as well as the public in general.

This leads me directly to President Carter's goals.

President Carter has challenged the people of this nation to seek and find a balance in the development of our resources that will not only meet our economic and commodity requirements but will give equal weight to our environmental and social needs as well.

The thrust of his challenge is this: Use our wealth to develop new wealth. Do not kidnap the resources we have today from tomorrow's children. The price of mindless plunder is a price too high to pay.

A policy of resource development, he says, must first, last and always involve the people. They should be the final arbiters of all major decisions -- not outside professional developers, whose only interest is immediate economic returns, or any other professional or technical advisors. The role of government should be to facilitate the decision-making. The Federal government should provide technical assistance and guidelines of a general nature to help achieve national goals. After the decisions are made by local people, the federal government can provide additional technical assistance and monetary help when necessary.

The role of the Federal government needs more discussion for the purpose of clarity.

We believe a satisfactory Federal-local government relationship was established in a specific land use planning effort recently completed in California. Let's look at it as a good case in point. The planning area covered approximately 300 square miles of the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains in Mono County, California. The planning effort involved Federal, State and county governments, and the final product is a master plan for a land area that includes private and local government lands and federal lands administered by the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Forest Service.

The Forest Service coordinated the effort for USDA and seven other federal agencies. Under a joint funding arrangement through the Western Federal Regional Council, Mono County contracted with a consultant to prepare draft analyses and alternatives and helped secure public involvement. The federal agencies provided much of the basic resource data and participated fully. The County recently adopted a final plan and is currently revising county zoning regulations. The results look very satisfactory. This approach probably should be applied elsewhere.

The Land: Professional Plans and Public Involvement

The Forest Service is not alone in its efforts to promote integrated planning. Many other Federal and State agencies, as well as city governments, private organizations, and industries, are making strides to bring their activities more into balance with Nature. These efforts are coming just in time.

I've heard visitors from other countries say that Americans are born planners, that we look too much toward the future and fail to appreciate the joys of the present. Unfortunately, this statement cannot be applied to our country's land use planning efforts. We should have engaged in rural land use planning years ago, but with a few rare exceptions, we failed to even think about the concept, let alone perceive its importance.

Today, we are suffering the consequences, and so is the land. This trend must be reversed if future generations are to continue receiving the material and spiritual benefits of our land and natural resources. Each day, land use planning, or the lack of it, affects every one of us.

Sometimes it affects us as a Nation. Each year, bulldozers bury at least a million acres of open land under a tomb of asphalt, concrete and brick. Much of this is productive agricultural land that is lost forever, along with its potential to feed future generations. We give credence to a definition I once heard of suburbia -- the place where developers bulldoze out the trees, and then name the streets after them.

Poor land use planning may affect us as a community. Forty years ago, a community was satisfied enough to be downstream, and downwind, from a chemical fertilizer plant. Times were hard, and the plant meant jobs, income and tax revenues to a small community. Today, the community has grown. So has our awareness of water and air pollution. And so has public opposition to the chemical fertilizer plant.

There are classic examples of how inadequate land use planning may harm individual property owners. A couple saves money for a lifetime to buy a home in the country. A few years later, the road is widened to four lanes. A motel is built to house travelers on the road, and gas stations are built to fuel the cars. Soon, a piece of land farther down the highway is converted into an automobile graveyard. To most of us, it is just another case of a neighborhood undergoing transition, from a quiet, residential area to a commercial strip. But, for the couple whose home represents a lifetime of work, it is a personal disaster, both financially and emotionally.

These personal, and national, tragedies could have been avoided. Ideally, land use planning would have been started on a "clean slate." It would have evolved as our Nation pushed westward -- as our towns grew into cities and then into metropolises. Instead, land use planning is just now emerging on a fairly broad scale, and is limited by many built-in constraints.

We do have one chance to start on a relatively clean slate. In Alaska, there is a chance for what might be called "pure" land use planning. Its an area where there are very few prior considerations, very few old mistakes to correct or live with. Within the next few years, Congress must decide what lands in Alaska will become public, and how those lands will be managed. As much as eighty-some million acres may be placed under the jurisdiction of several Federal agencies, including the Forest Service.

This is a tremendous challenge to the entire population of the United States -- to make Alaska the shining example of what we know about land use planning, to prove that we need not repeat the mistakes we made in the past. Yet relatively few citizens realize that we face an issue of such magnitude, of such potential. I am hoping that the American people will take time to look beyond their neighborhoods, beyond their state boundaries, and participate in a land use planning issue which will affect the future of the entire country.

In most areas of the country, land use planning didn't gain momentum until competition for available land -- for a variety of uses -- became almost frantic. Now it is even more difficult to initiate effective land use planning, since we've already closed some of our options. Once patterns of land-use have developed, it's difficult to reverse the trends, even if they happen to be outdated or inadequate.

The problems we face in land use planning today are direct results of our historical philosophy of land use and distribution. Some nations have always been keenly aware of a limited land base. Countries such as England and Holland have been economical and prudent in their land use for several centuries. The United States, however, evolved very differently. The original 13 colonies were expanded by Western lands obtained from the Indians and won from the French. The Louisiana and Gadsden Purchases added even more acreage.

Rich with public lands, the Federal government began to dispose of lands as quickly as they were acquired. Laws were enacted to encourage development of new territory and to move the Nation westward toward the Golden Gate. We've long since reached that Golden Gate and can go no farther. Two foreign borders and two oceans remind us that we've run out of new frontiers.

Now that land use planning has become a necessity, we face some rugged barriers to effective planning. Perhaps the greatest barrier is the tremendous diversity of land ownership. Even a relatively small planning area may include land owned by Federal, State and local governments, plus a score of private individuals and corporations. Each owner has his own goals for the land in question, and each owner may profit from a different use of the land. In optimizing goals for the land, someone is going to lose, no matter what decision is ultimately made.

The problem of checkerboard ownership patterns is intensified by an almost-sacred tradition of strong personal property rights, brought by the Pilgrims from England. This is one of the main reasons we have not had more land use planning in the past.

I personally believe that we can preserve the rights of personal property and still have effective land use planning which will benefit American society as a whole.

In a land use controversy, there is no one solution which will win the hearts and minds of everyone involved. This, in itself, is one of the best arguments for public involvement in land use planning. For there is also a long-standing tradition in this country that inspires individuals to do their share to help achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people, while protecting the rights of minorities.

Public involvement is an essential ingredient. Specialists in land use planning, forestry, urban development, transportation and a multitude of other disciplines could sit down and draw up supposedly-ideal plans for land use in this country. Yet, for all their expertise, these plans would lack one very essential ingredient -- the desires of the American people. Although Senators, Congressmen and other government officials may try to gauge the attitudes of the Nation, I cannot think of any man or woman in Washington who professes to know the desires and judgments of 216 million people.

The public must become involved in the vital land use planning decisions of this era. No issue is too large or too small, too close or too remote for public involvement. I referred earlier to the difficulty of reconciling conflicting demands for an area of land. Through public involvement, there can at least be a meeting of attitudes and ideas, if not of hearts and minds.

One of the greatest barriers to public involvement can be the mountains of information -- much of it highly technical -- that often enter into land use planning. This is especially evident now. I believe we can simplify this information and be more responsive to the people we serve.

The People: Their Resources and Their Problems

It is only natural for a people in a given area to consider their resources, their economic needs, and their problems as being unique.

And this is the right attitude. It's as it should be. Every defined region has its unique attractions, its own conglomerate of resources, its own weather and climate, its own potential for social and economic development. And the people have their own special set of problems.

The leaders of this region have done an outstanding job in assessing your resources and analyzing your problems. You realize that your region is tailor-made for multiple use planning programs.

You have your superb water resources -- an incomparable network of lakes and streams. Development of a portion of this resource for commercial purposes including tourism need not endanger or deplete the area. With wise planning, enhancement of environmental quality is a possibility.

We have an immediate need to take a fresh look at the whole wetlands issue. Wetlands are unique ecosystems that offer values to many segments of our society. To date, the major Federal role in wetlands regulation has been exercised through the Army Corps of Engineers' program of granting permits for the discharge of dredge and fill material. USDA will provide leadership in developing a total management approach to use of wetlands.

I have re-established a "Departmental Committee on Planning and Policy for Land Use and Land Conservation." Its charter will be to focus on high-priority land use problems facing this nation. One of the committee's first tasks will be to address the need for a national wetlands policy. This is a high-priority concern of the Department of Agriculture. It is important that the wetlands task force identify the physical extent of wetlands, evaluate potential land use impacts resulting from alternative agricultural decisions, and formulate appropriate policy recommendations. The program elements should address the appropriate mix of tools such as use permits, land acquisition, easements, enhancement opportunities, and mitigation opportunities. Alternative levels of various wetland protection and management program components and associated costs will be developed.

In addition to your lakes and streams, you have your wetlands which are of great commercial and environmental value. Wise forest management of this renewable resource will assure its continued utility and beauty.

Land Use Planning Assistance: The USDA's Delivery System

The secret of success for any comprehensive land-use planning program is in the "delivery system."

None of the Department of Agriculture's wealth of information, research, educational and technical assistance, and available funds are worth a dime unless they are delivered to the people and the regions that need them and use them.

The USDA's nationwide delivery system for land-use information includes several thousand county offices of USDA agencies and Cooperative Extension Services; more than 3,000 conservation districts; the research centers of all State Land Grant Universities, and the cooperative efforts with state forestry and agricultural agencies.

At local and state levels, the Department has close and effective working relationships with decision-makers. It administers more than 80 programs helpful in making land-use decisions by landholders and by regions.

I have directed the agencies under my jurisdiction to give increased emphasis to the following policies:

...Increase production of detailed soil surveys.

...Establish land-capability criteria to help direct the flow of urbanization to land areas least suited to crops and forests.

...Help guide urban growth to preserve prime farm lands, minimize fragmentation of land holdings, provide adequate water supplies, equalize taxes, dispose of waste properly, and provide adequate public health, recreation and safety services.

...Control erosion and reduce sedimentation.

...Minimize the impact of surface mining on rural land uses.

...Locate sites for solid waste disposal as an increasingly important land use.

...Give attention to need for small watershed, flood plain, wetlands, and coastal zone management programs based on comprehensive land-use planning incorporating ecological considerations.

...Encourage multiple-use management of forest lands to assure a continuous supply of forest goods and services while meeting environmental objectives.

...Manage farm, ranch, and forest practices to minimize adverse effects on the environment.

The Department's over-all policy to help in orderly land and resource development can be summarized in eight major points:

- (1) To conduct programs within state and Federal environmental standards.
- (2) To conserve and improve land and related resources.
- (3) To enhance the amenities and social assets of rural America.

- (4) To seek fair returns for farms, forests, and ranches as economic units.
- (5) To support research and education on land-use planning.
- (6) To promote economic development in the rural areas.
- (7) To assist all citizens and agencies to obtain technical data needed for planning.
- (8) To continue to act in concert with Federal, state, multi-jurisdictional planning and development agencies, local agencies, quasi-public and private organizations, and individual landowners and operators.

The USDA's programs to help in the development of areas like yours are designed to give people a "handup," and are not a "hand-out" subsidy.

Land-use planning is a relatively new social engineering tool. All of us still are learning how to use it most effectively. But by dint of cooperation of all parties at every level, good legislation, and proper administration, we can achieve the resource conservation and rural development objectives we all want and must have.

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